NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6156 SEPTEMBER 25, 1978
BILL MARSH/MUNICH

GDR CHURCH-STATE DIFFERENCES

ANNCR:

EAST GERMANY'S PROTESTANT CHURCH HAS TAKEN ISSUE WITH THE PARTY AND STATE ON SEVERAL BASIC ISSUES, INCLUDING MILITARY TEACHING IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM AND WHAT THE CHURCH CALLS "FASCIST BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOR" AMONG MANY OF THE COUNTRY'S YOUNG PEOPLE. VOA CORRESPONDENT BILL MARSH SENT THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM OUR EUROPEAN BUREAU:

VOICE:

THE VIEWS OF EAST GERMANY'S PROTESTANT CHURCH LEADERS ARE BEING EXPRESSED AT A SYNOD IN EAST BERLIN, AND THE FOCUS OF THIS CHURCH GATHERING IS CLEARLY ON YOUTH. SELDOM IN THE HISTORY OF THIS SYNOD, HOWEVER, HAS THERE BEEN SUCH A CLEAR EXPRESSION OF DIFFERENCES WITH THE STATE AND PARTY LEADERSHIP OF THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC.

THE MOST IMPORTANT OF THESE DIFFERENCES WAS STATED AT THE VERY START OF THE SYNOD. IN ITS YEARLY REPORT, THE SYNOD LEADERSHIP DECLARED FLATLY THAT IT DISAGREED WITH THE NEWLY-INSTITUTED MILITARY INSTRUCTION, NOW MANDATORY IN ALL EAST GERMAN SCHOOLS. THE PROTESTANT CHURCH LEADERS SAID THAT THE CHURCH WILL RESIST ANY ACTIVITY THAT "ROMANTICIZES MILITARY LIFE". YOUNG PEOPLE MUST BE TAUGHT THE VALUE OF PEACE, THE CHURCHMEN SAID, NOT WAR.

IT WAS IN A SIMILAR VEIN THAT ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL PROTESTANT LEADERS IN EAST GERMANY STRUCK OUT AT WHAT HE PERCEIVES AS A TENDENCY TOWARD FACISISM AMONG EAST GERMAN YOUTH. BISHOP ALBRECH SCHOENHERR, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE UNION OF PROTESTANT CHURCHES IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC, EXPRESSED HIS

COMPLAINT BEFORE THE SYNOD OVER THE WEEKEND. HE SAID THAT BY INSISTING THAT FASCIST THINKING EXISTS ONLY IN WEST GERMANY, THE EAST GERMAN GOVERNMENT IS IN EFFECT ENCOURAGING THE GROWTH OF FASCIST IDEAS AT HOME. ANOTHER LEADING CHURCHMAN TOLD THE SYNOD HE KNEW OF CASES WHERE EAST GERMAN YOUNG PEOPLE PLAYED GAMES IN WHICH THE OBJECT WAS THE LIQUIDATION OF JEWS. THIS, HE SAID, IS EVIDENCE THAT THE FASCIST LEGACY IS NOT GEOGRAPHICALLY RESTRICTED TO WEST GERMANY, AS CONTENDED BY THE EAST GERMAN PARTY AND GOVERNMENT.

THE FACT THAT THE PROTESTANT LEADERSHIP SHOULD TAKE SUCH A STRONG STAND ON THESE ISSUES -- A STAND THAT IS ESSENTIALLY AT ODDS WITH THE POSITION OF THE PARTY AND STATE -- HAS ATTRACTED A GOOD DEAL OF WEST GERMAN COMMENT. MANY EDITORIALISTS SEE THIS OUTSPOKENNESS AS INDICATIVE OF A NEW CHURCH-STATE RELATIONSHIP, ONE IN WHICH THE PROTESTANT CHURCH PLAYS A MUCH MORE INFLUENTIAL ROLE IN THE FORMATION OF PUBLIC OPINION.

I'T'S BEEN POINTED OUT THAT THIS FIVE-DAY SYNOD IS THE FIRST GATHERING OF ALL EIGHT REGIONAL EVANGELICAL CHURCHES SINCE SENIOR CHURCHMEN MET WITH COMMUNIST PARTY LEADER ERICH HONECKER IN MARCH TO DISCUSS WAYS TO EASE CHURCH-STATE TENSIONS. ONE RESULT OF THAT MEETING WAS THE CHURCH'S EXPRESSED RESOLVE TO WORK WITHIN THE SOCIALIST SYSTEM. ANOTHER WAS THE CHURCH'S EXPRESSED DETERMINATION NEVER TO BECOME PART OF THE SOCIALIST "MASS ORGANIZATION" STRUCTURE. BOTH PRINCIPLES WERE SPELLED OUT IN THE REPORT PRESENTED TO PARTICIPANTS WHEN THE SYNOD OPENED LAST FRIDAY.

CHURCH LEADERS SAID THE MARCH MEETING HAD SHOWN THAT THERE WAS A "NEW READINESS" BY STATE AUTHORITIES TO RESPECT THE VOICE OF THE CHURCH, BUT IT ADDED THAT THERE HAD BEEN SOME AREAS OF DISAPPOINTMENT. WHILE THESE WERE NOT SPECIFIED, WESTERN

COMMENTATORS SPECULATE THAT THE PRINCIPAL DIFFERENCES LAY IN THE THEMES THAT HAVE SO FAR DOMINATED THE SYNOD: NAMELY, THE EDUCATION OF THE COUNTRY'S YOUNG PEOPLE.

REPORTS FROM THE SYNOD INDICATE THE CHURCHMEN WILL MAINTAIN A STRONG STAND ON ELIMINATING MILITARY TRAINING FROM THE SCHOOL SYSTEM AND ON INSTRUCTING THE POPULATION THAT FASCIST TENDENCIES MUST BE ELIMINATED WHEREVER THEY APPEAR, EVEN IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC.

GH/RCS